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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7279
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0979
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4532
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8070
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5631
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1446
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1395
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000183

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: NLD MANDALAY PROMOTES OPPOSITION, LACKS RESOURCES

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Classified By: Poloff Chelsia Wheeler for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary. The NLD in Mandalay faces a number of challenges that reflect those encountered throughout the rest of Burma. These include lack of public awareness, lack of offices and resources to carry out activities, and a short time span in which to promote votes against the constitution in May. Members predict that the government will rig the election by tampering with ballot boxes and hand-selecting observers of the counting of the votes. The arrests of the leading political activists with good organizational skills will be another major impediment. End Summary.

Challenges To the NLD In Mandalay

12. (C) On February 28, Poloff met with five members of NLD Mandalay to learn their thoughts on the upcoming May referendum and their plans of action in preparation for it. They described three major challenges to their ability to conduct their work in opposing the regime's draft constitution. The first problem is that while the Rangoon branch of the NLD has a headquarters from which it carries out its activities and issues statements, NLD Mandalay has no office, and, according to NLD member U Ko Ko Gyi, they cannot even make photocopies or stamps to promote their work. The situation for NLD Mandalay, he asserts, more accurately reflects that of other NLD branches throughout the country rather than what officials and diplomats see in Rangoon. (Note: NLD offices around the country, except the headquarters in Rangoon, were shut down by the military in the 1990s.)

13. (C) Limited public awareness presents a second challenge in Mandalay and rural areas. While citizens throughout Burma agree that the government does not help them, Joint Secretary U Thein Tan said that people in rural areas do not understand that they could live more prosperous lives under a democratically elected government. U Thein Tan also explained that people in rural areas suffer more from governmental mismanagement: the military forces them to sell

their crops at a fraction of the market rate, and buy supplies at inflated prices. NLD Mandalay thus faces the difficult task of educating the population on democratic ideals without publications or an office. U Ko Ko Gyi said that they primarily communicate with the people by word of mouth.

¶4. (C) The third major challenge for the NLD in the upcoming referendum is time. According to U Ko Ko Gyi, NLD Mandalay will only start their public awareness campaign against the constitution once it is published. He pointed out, however, that no one knows when the government will release the constitution, and it may be only one or two weeks before the referendum, leaving them very little time to act.

Rigging the Referendum

¶5. (C) All five of the NLD members we met believe strongly that the regime will not conduct the referendum fairly. They pointed out several areas they believe the government will manipulate to its advantage. One is the registration of voters. Registration is the responsibility of the various ward leaders throughout the country, giving rise to inconsistencies in registering voters.

¶6. (C) They pointed out the increasingly common practice among government officials of offering expedited, free National Registration Cards (NRC) in exchange for a supportive vote in the referendum. These cards normally cost around 70,000 kyat (USD 61) and may take months to issue. Without the cards, Burmese citizens have no freedom to move around the country or conduct any business transactions, so having them issued quickly and free-of-charge is a convincing incentive. U Ko Ko Gyi worried that the rural population did not realize that they might still be able to vote against the constitution, if the ballot were truly secret.

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¶7. (C) Another problem that U Thein Tan foresees lies in the methods of voting and vote counting. If citizens put their ballots into separate "yes" and "no" boxes, rather than putting "yes" and "no" votes all into the same box, he anticipates that a large number of the "no" boxes will become inexplicably lost and that it would be easy to determine how people voted. Another part of the referendum law calls for all votes to be counted in front of ten average citizens. The government had no qualms about picking "average" representatives for the National Convention and he believes that its method of selection for vote counting would be similar.

¶8. (C) Comment. NLD Mandalay members offered a realistic appraisal of the challenges they face in mobilizing a campaign against the referendum. Not all are as passive. Unfortunately most of Mandalay NLD's most active members have been in jail since last September. The regime has systematically arrested those it believed most capable of organizing voters. This may prove the biggest impediment to a campaign against the referendum. End Comment.
VILLAROSA